

ABSTRACT OF THE DISCLOSURES

Disclosed is a method of transdifferentiating an epidermal basal cell into a cell having one or more morphological, physiological and/or immunological features of a neural progenitor, neuronal, or glial cell by culturing a proliferating epidermal basal cell population derived from the skin of a mammalian subject; transfecting the cells, in vitro, with one or more eukaryotic expression vector(s) that contain at least one cDNA encoding a human neurogenic transcription factor, or homologous non-human counterpart, or active fragment(s) thereof, such as NeuroD1, NeuroD2, ASH1, Zic1, Zic3, or MyT1, such that at least one of the neurogenic transcription factor(s) is expressed in the cell; growing the cells in an in vitro growth medium in which is present at least one antisense oligonucleotide comprising a segment of a human MSX1 gene and/or human HES1 gene, or homologous non-human counterpart of either of these, thereby suppressing at least one negative regulator of neuronal differentiation; and the cell(s) are, optionally, further grown with a retinoid and at least one neurotrophin, such as BDNF, CNTF, PDGF, NGF, NT-3, NT-4, or sonic hedgehog, or a cytokine comprising IL-6. Also disclosed is a transdifferentiated cell of epidermal origin and cell cultures derived therefrom. In addition, methods of using the inventive transdifferentiated cell(s) and cell cultures to identify a novel nerve growth factor or to screen a potential chemotherapeutic agent by detecting the presence or absence of an effect, in vitro, on a morphological, physiological and/or molecular biological property of the transdifferentiated cell(s) are described, as is a method of using the transdifferentiated cell(s) and cell cultures to screen a potential chemotherapeutic agent to treat a nervous system disorder of genetic origin. A kit useful for practicing the methods is disclosed.

15860.1